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ABSTRACT

A study examined how often basic writers miscued, the kinds of miscues they made, the possible factors related to why they made miscues, whether they corrected their miscues, and the degree to which miscues may have prevented them from seeing textual problems. Subjects, three female basic writers (part of a larger study) participated in four taped sessions where they were asked to read orally two of their own texts and two of their peers' texts. Think-aloud protocols were used to identify and propose problems in the texts. Results indicated subjects made a minimal numbers of miscues which they seldom corrected, that most of these miscues were word substitutions, and that most of these substitutions did not alter the syntax or meaning of the sentence. Findings suggest that the degree to which the miscues influenced revision was minimal. (An appendix of data is attached.) (RS)

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THE INFLUENCE OF MISCUES ON BASIC WRITERS' REVISION STRATEGIES

Brenda M. Greene

Overview of Problem

A miscue is a term coined by Kenneth Goodman to describe what occurs when there is a discrepancy between the words we read and the actual words in the text. In other words we may read words that are not actually on the page. If we examine this concept as one which operates when we are revising essays, there is an underlying assumption that miscues may influence how we revise our texts. This appears to be the underlying assumption when instructors of basic writing say that before students submit an essay to them, they must orally reread the essay. The assumption is miscues account for many errors of basic writers. Therefore, if basic writers orally reread their papers, their revisions will result in fewer miscues and thereby fewer errors. This researcher/instructor questions the degree to which miscues influence basic writers' revison strategies and she will discuss this assumption from the perspective of findings generated from her research.

Inevitably, an oral rereading of an essay signifies for students that the essay contains some additional problems that they may have overlooked. Based on this rereading, students may substitute some words, insert or omit some words within a sentence, restructure a sentence and sometimes restructure a paragraph. By rereading their texts, these students are engaging

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in the process that most experienced writers engage in before they submit a paper, that is, they are taking time to "resee" and reflect on their texts; they are either reading their texts to someone or asking someone for feedback. They are revising their texts on the local and global levels and are accomplishing this by rephrasing sentences and paragraphs and in some cases restructuring the entire essay.

When instructors ask student writers to reread their essays, they are treating students as real writers and providing them with the opportunity to engage in the kind of reading that will enable them to make effective revisions. They are asking them to inhibit what Elsa Bartlett calls their privileged information about their texts so that they can make effective revisions on various levels of the text.

The reading required to revise essays is different than the kind of reading which naturally occurs in the reading process. The psycholinguist, Kenneth Goodman, informs us that good readers are those who are able to use the graphic, syntactic, and semantic information of the text in order to anticipate, predict, and obtain the writer's intended meaning. Good readers are more concerned with comprehending the text than they are with reading it word for word. Therefore, good readers may omit, substitute, or insert words which do not affect the meaning of the text they are reading. This process of omitting, substituting, and inserting words is described by Goodman as a mismatch between the

observed response and the expected response. Goodman classifies these mismatches as miscues and informs us that they naturally occur in the reading process. According to Goodman, miscues are only problematic when they interfere with how readers comprehend texts.

Although miscues are a natural part of the reading process, they may be problematic when readers engage in the kind of reading described by Bartlett. The reading needed to revise one's text involves being able to recognize when words have been omitted, when a different word might better convey a writer's meaning or when phrases and sentences are awkwardly constructed. If readers make too many miscues, they may not be able to see lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical problems in their texts.

When Sondra Perl studied the composing process of unskilled college writers, she found that the number of problems in their written texts approximated the number of miscues. She, therefore, concluded that miscues accounted for a number of the errors that unskilled writers make.

Warters, in her study of the composing process of basic writers, found that basic writers generated a great amount of miscues in order to make sense of the text. She found that one writer miscued 25% of the time.

The research of Perl and Warters provided me with the desire to provide further documentation on the degree to which miscues may have influenced basic writers' revisions of their own and

peers' texts. I was interested in examining a) how often basic writers miscued, b) the kinds of miscues they made, c) the possible factors related to why they made miscues d) whether they corrected their miscues, and e) the degree to which miscues may have prevented them from seeing textual problems.

Methodology

In order to examine the relationship between basic writers' miscues and revision strategies, I conducted a study. The subjects for this study were three basic writers who were part of a larger study. For purposes of confidentiality, they were called Marie, Carol, and Diana. They participated in four taped sessions in which they were asked to read orally two of their own texts and two of their peers' texts. Think-aloud protocols were then used as a method for asking them to identify and propose solutions to problems in these texts.

Each text that the writers read and responded to was transcribed. Goodman's Taxonomy for classifying and describing miscues was used to determine the number and kinds of miscues the participants made, the degree to which miscues were recovered, the grammatical and semantic acceptability of the miscues, the degree to which miscues affected the meaning of the texts and the degree to which miscues interfered with the writer's ability to identify and resolve textual problems. A detailed description of these findings can be found in my dissertation, "A Case Study of the Problem Identification and Resolution Strategies Used by

Basic Writers As They Read Their Texts and the Texts of Their Peers with the Intention of Improving Them." A summary of the findings will be presented and those findings most applicable for the relationship between basic writers' miscues and their ability to identify textual problems will be discussed in more depth.

Findings

The findings from my study revealed that the participants made a minimal number of miscues (3% to 10%) which they seldom corrected (Greene 231) (See Appendix A). Most of the miscues were word substitutions (77%-own texts, 92%-peers' texts); this was followed by word insertions (14%-own texts, 3%-peers' texts) and lastly, word omissions (9%-own texts, 5%-peers' texts). These findings corroborate the research of Yetta Goodman which found that most miscues were word substitutions (116). Furthermore, most of the miscues related to graphic and sound proximity and had either a partial or total degree of syntactic and semantic acceptability. In other words, the miscues were for the most part, substitutions of words which sounded or looked alike. These substitutions did not alter the syntax or meaning of the sentence.

There were several instances when the participants repeated miscues as they attempted to revise their texts and the texts of their peers. Those miscues which they repeated appear to either be dialect-related or the result of sound and graphic proximity.

These findings suggest that although the participants made

miscues in their oral reading and as they identified textual problems, the degree to which these miscues influenced their revising process was minimal. The miscues which they made primarily related to surface problems on the local level of discourse and did not prevent the participants of the study from identifying different kinds of problems, that is, those related to using a more appropriate word, correcting an error in agreement, restructuring a sentence or paragraph and recognizing when problems existed on the rhetorical level of the text.

A description of the relationship between the evidence of miscues and the ability to revise texts as demonstrated by basic writers is most useful when we examine the degree to which they repeat and correct miscues as they identify and recommend solutions to textual problems.

In looking at the substitution miscues repeated by the participants in their own texts, I found, for example, that Marie read "would" as "will" on five separate occasions and "lives" as "life" on three separate occasions. Diana read "bought" as "brought" in three separate instances and "people" as "peoples" in six separate instances (Greene 134). These miscues appeared to be repeated because the participants had formed habitual associations with the words and because the words were related to dialect and/or graphic and sound proximity. "People" vs. "peoples" is a good illustration of the possible reasons for why basic writers repeat miscues. When the participants identified

the problems in their texts, they never referred to these miscues. Although they did not recognize these surface level problems, they did recognize other kinds of problems in their texts.

There were only two instances when the participants attempted to correct the miscues they made as they read their own texts. Carol successfully corrected a miscue in her own text when she read "themself" for "themselves." Marie unsuccessfully corrected a miscue when she read "traditional" as "tradition" in her first text. In other words, Marie, in attempting to correct her miscue of "tradition" repeated the word "traditional." Although the particpants attempted to correct these miscues, they did not recognize that these words represented problems at the syntactical and semantic levels of their texts. They attempted to correct these miscues, but they did not attempt to correct the problems in their texts. Despite the fact that these miscues reflected other kinds of problems, they had no influence on the kinds of problems the participants identified.

As in the reading of their own texts, the participants' repeated miscues in the texts of their peers appeared to be the result of graphic and sound proximity and/or dialect. All of the participants, for example, read "scientist" as "scientists" as they read their first peers' text (Greene 192). The writer of this text added or deleted the "s" in an irregular manner. In reading "scientist" as "scientists", the participants corrected

the word during their oral reading; however, when they identified and proposed solutions to problems in the text, they never mentioned that the writer had left the "s" off of "scientists" in several instances. They repeated the word "scientists" in their discussion of other textual problems, but it appears that their miscue prevented them from seeing this writer's problem with an inflectional ending.

An example of how a miscue may have provided insight into a writer's problem identification strategies can be observed in how Diana read the sentence fragment: "For without them we would still be living in the stone age" (Greene 195). This phrase was taken from an essay in which the writer discussed how important scientists were to this society. Diana read this sentence fragment as part of the previous sentence. Thus the sentence Diana actually read was:
"Scientists are needed more than dentists for without them we would still be living in the stone age" (195). When Diana discussed the problems in this text, she indicated that this sentence was problematic and she would take out "for" and put a comma there. Diana, thus solved the problem of the sentence fragment by creating a problem of a comma splice.

Carol's miscue of this sentence did not yield the same results. She read the sentence as: "Scientists are needed more than dentists for within them we would still be living in the stone age" (Greene 195). Carol, like Diana, knew intuitively

that the phrase: "For without them we would still be living in the stone age" was incomplete. She attempted to correct it by combining it with the previous sentence. However, unlike Diana, when discussing the problems in this text, Carol never referred to this sentence.

Marie, Carol, and Diana made miscues when they read with the intention to improve their own and peers' texts. The number of miscues were minimal and the researcher/instructor examined ways in which these miscues may have influenced how the participants identified and recommended solutions to textual problems. In one instance, a miscue offered insight into the kind of problem a participant identified. In several instances, the miscues were repeated as the participants identified problems. However, to say that these miscues influenced how the participants revised texts would be misleading. My analysis was based on a small sample and offered insight into the kind and number of miscues the particpants made as they read and attempted to revise texts.

Conclusion

This was a case study of three writers and its findings should be viewed tentatively and documented through further study. The findings from this study suggest that although miscues occur when basic writers read texts and when they attempt to revise them, they occur to a minimal degree and do not have a major influence on how basic writers revise their own and peers' texts. Those miscues which do occur are primarily on the surface

level and they do not prevent basic writers from seeing other textual problems related to syntax, meaning, and organization.

The problems of revision for basic writers are related to problems which are much more complex than those represented by miscues. They are related to problems expressed by what Perl calls a tendency to engage in premature editing, what Warters calls little evidence of planning, what Flowers et al. call a tendency to detect ill-defined problems, and what Greene suggest is a lack of experience in engaging in the kind of reading that is necessary to identify and resolve problems in their own and peers' texts.

As experienced readers, we make miscues; in fact, we have the assistance of editors who help us to recover our surface level miscues. Our miscues seldom prevent us from seeing the kinds of revisions we wish to make. When we revise, we make changes on all levels of the text. We should expect no more from our students than we expect from ourselves. Our basic writers will continue to do as we do, to make miscues; however, miscues are not the source of their problem; the source of their problem is that they do not have enough experience reading their writing in progress and becoming responsible for identifying and recommending solutions to problems in their texts. When we ask basic writers to reread their texts, we should give them specific suggestions for what they should look for and what they should revise during this rereading. We have to give basic writers those experiences which will enable them to become more independent readers and writers of texts.

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Number of Miscues: Own Texts

Participant		Marie	Carol	Diana	Total
Text 1	Number of Miscues	22	9	19	50
	Number of Words in Text	226	239	227	694
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	10	4	8	7
Text 2	Number of Miscues	20	20	6	46
	Number of Words in Text	259	378	184	809
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	8	5	3	6
Totals for Texts 1 and 2	Number of Miscues	42	29	25	96
	Number of Words in Text	485	617	411	1503
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	9	5	6	6

Number of Miscues: Peers' Texts

Participant		Marie	Carol	Dinna	Total
Text 1	Number of Miscues	26	15	21	62
	Number of Words in Text	454	454	454	454
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	6	3	5	5
Text 2	Number of Miscues	30	13	13	56
	Number of Words in Text	325	325	325	975
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	9	4	4	6
Totals for Texts 1 and 2	Number of Miscues	56	28	34	118
	Number of Words in Text	779	779	779	2337
	Percent: Miscues per Number of Words	7	4	4	5